

Dear Friends,

The Bible contains a rich display of various symbols and "Figures" to bring important spiritual truths to life in our minds. If respectfully interpreted, they simplify those truths in a way that "Sticks" with us. Far too much teaching on passages containing these symbols ignores the wide variety of symbols and treats all symbolic passages as allegories, one of many different symbolic methods contained in Scripture, and possibly the least used. Only one time in the whole Bible does the word "allegory" appear, Galatians 4:24. Our study passage employs the rather straightforward "Figure" of speech method to teach us about baptism as our outward manifestation of our inward commitment to Jesus and to His people, a truth that connects our study passage with lessons in the chapter leading up to our study verses. Excessive symbolizing of passages, as well as unwise

misuse of the literary symbols that Scripture does use, has led to a wise cliché, "When the literal sense of a passage makes sense, look for no other sense." I would add an additional rule to follow in our study of Scripture. When you want to understand the basic truths of a particular Bible teaching, search for those literal passages that teach the truth you study. Use symbolic passages related to this teaching only as supportive to the literal passages. Far too many Bible students fall into the trap of looking to the symbolic passages to interpret the literal. An unbridled imagination using this "Upside down" method can rationalize just about any idea that appeals to our sinful fancy.

Our study passage actually deals with two events, both of which Peter teaches us, are figures of one reality, one fact. Peter reminds us of this thought by his choice of words, "like figure." Both things are figures, and they "Alike" direct us to a single reality, the victorious

resurrection of Jesus, despite persecution, rejection, and even death.

In the greater context of 1 Peter and its theme of suffering, either as a Christian or as an evil doer, the reality (No symbol or "Figure" here) of Jesus' victorious resurrection should command our thoughts and our praise to God. Because Jesus overcame persecution for well-doing, by His grace we may also overcome our troubles by keeping our faith fresh and focused on Him as we face those hard times.

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

### **Baptism: Figure vs. Fact**

**For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might**

**bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him. (1 Peter 3:18-22 KJV 1900)**

Why should decent, godly Christians suffer persecution at the hands of evil-minded wicked people? Peter seemingly anticipated this question. Since God's will is true, he reasons, it

is far better for us to suffer as Christians than to suffer as evil doers. Why, Peter? And our study lesson answers our question. Did Jesus suffer as an evil doer? No. He suffered selflessly for others, for us. He was just. We for whom He suffered were unjust. He was deserving of the Father's approval. We were not.

Why did Jesus suffer? What purpose drove Him to suffer as He did? **"...that he might bring us to God."** "That" points to His purpose in suffering. And, no, "Might" does not in any way imply mere good intentions. It completes the logical "That" of the lesson. The effectiveness of "Might" hinges on Jesus and His suffering, not on something we do. **"That he might bring us to God,"** not that we might bring ourselves. Peter makes this truth clearer in his letters.

**Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver**

**and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God. (1 Peter 1:18-21 KJV)**

I recall a discussion from my youth. My father was discussing his faith with a relative who believed differently. Dad believed in salvation all of God in grace. Our relative believed in salvation by human effort. Despite being only eight or nine years old at the time, when our relative said, “Why, I have no doubt that Billy Graham saved more people than Jesus did,” I was shocked. I have no doubt that Billy Graham was a man of integrity, though I didn’t agree with

many of his teachings. But Billy Graham needed a Savior the same as we all did. He was not the Savior of sinners. Honestly, I doubt that he would have approved of this comment.

Jesus suffered for us, to translate us from the world of darkness, with its certain fearful end, and to bring us to God as beloved and securely saved children in the family of God. Therefore, when life brings seasons of suffering or persecution on us because of our faith in Jesus, Peter reasons that it is altogether right that we endure that suffering with His aid and for His honor.

**...being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.** Peter describes both the extent of Jesus' suffering for us and the glory of His success, His victory over His suffering. He came in human flesh. John describes His coming.

**And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (John 1:14 KJV)**

You will occasionally encounter someone who claims to believe in Jesus, but they believe that the eternal “Word” of God never became flesh. Well, they need to take up that argument with John, and with the Holy Spirit who directed John to write this verse, for it categorically states that the same “Word” who existed from all eternity, who was with God as His equal, and who was God in His essential being and character, was indeed **“made flesh, and dwelt among us.”** Paul wrote the same truth.

**And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in**



**the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. (1 Timothy 3:16 KJV)**

According to Paul, also inspired by the Holy Spirit, it was no less than God who was manifest in the flesh in the person of Jesus. “Manifest” is central to Paul’s teaching. The implication is powerful. He who existed eternally became visible in flesh, as a man. Jesus, the eternal Word of God, lived in human flesh for around thirty years. He “...**went about doing good**” (Acts 10:38 KJV) in His human flesh. And, in the end, He suffered an ignominious death at the hands of wicked men in His human flesh. But, also in His human flesh, He arose from death, continued to appear, and teach His disciples for forty days before ascending back into heaven and the glory of “Mission accomplished.” Paul rightly reasoned that we should face whatever comes our way with grace and with faith in Jesus if we are

living our faith and not our imagination. (2 Corinthians 10:4-6 KJV)

**By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.** This verse is frequently tortured to teach ideas which it does not teach. Peter's point, I believe, was simple. The same Jesus who came and suffered in the flesh, visited His people during their trying times throughout the Old Testament. He used Noah as an example of this truth. Likely, during the long years when Noah was building the ark, he faced ridicule from the people around him. But, in the end, it was that same ark which the Lord directed Noah to build that saved him and his family from the Lord's judgment against that wicked age. In 2 Peter 2:5, Peter refers to Noah as a "Preacher of righteousness." The people of Noah's

generation were in the prison of their own sins and the coming judgment of God. Nevertheless, Noah continued to do what the Lord commanded him; he built the ark. His faithfulness “Preached” the righteousness of God to that generation. Paul echoes this truth, “...**as though God did beseech you by us.**” (2 Corinthians 5:20 KJV) This idea matches the context of Peter’s teaching far better than the idea that Jesus went to the place of the wicked dead, and preached to them, a thought that I cannot find in any other passage in Scripture. Therefore, to charge this lesson with teaching it contradicts the harmony of Scripture.

**...wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.** The Lord’s judgment against the wicked age in which Noah lived was a temporal judgment, not the final judgment of the wicked. Likewise, Peter will teach us that there is a true salvation for the believing, obedient child of God in water baptism, but that salvation, like the salvation of Noah and his family, is a salvation

from the wicked world around us. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter affirmed this truth.

**And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. (Acts 2:40 KJV)**

Whenever we encounter any of the “Save” words in Scripture, we should ask at least two questions of the text. Saved from what? Saved to what? Peter addressed these words to people whom He had just directed to repent and be baptized in Jesus’ name. In this verse, he answers these questions. Baptism would save them from the wicked generation of professing religious people responsible for the sufferings and death of Jesus. As then, so now, baptism based on Biblical faith in Jesus sets the believer apart from the wicked culture in which he/she lives. In our study passage, Peter affirms this truth. The ark separated and saved Noah and his family from

that wicked generation which was destroyed by the flood. How is it with you? Since your baptism, have you continued to live up to the meaning of your baptism? Have you faithfully lived apart from the ever-changing fickle world around you? Or have you forgotten that precious moment of faith and chosen identity with this world instead of Jesus and His way?

**The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,). Baptism is a “Like figure” to Noah and his family’s deliverance. These two words were translated from one Greek word. Louw-Nida defines that word, “...corresponds in form and structure to something else.”**

Baptism “now saves” us, a truth that corresponds in form and structure to Noah’s experience in the

ark. First, do not overlook that baptism is a “Figure,” a symbol of something which is real and true. Folks who use this lesson to support their belief that water baptism is essential for eternal salvation miss this point. Stand in the bright sunshine and look at your shadow. It is a “Figure” of your body. Can your shadow, think, speak, or move around? No. Only your actual body can do those things. Interestingly, based on this lesson, both Noah’s deliverance “by water” and our baptism are figures. That means they point to a greater reality. The “Saving” which is quite real in a believer’s baptism is a “**Now**” salvation, not eternal salvation. Baptism “Figures” or reveals the image of our eternal salvation, but it is not that salvation. Peter adds emphasis to this point.

**“...not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God.”** I have not found a single Bible passage which refers to “Filth of the flesh” as

external dirt on the body. Peter uses this thought to clarify that water baptism does not put away our sins, the internal filth of sin and its damning effects on us. If we remain faithful to our commitment that prompted us to seek baptism, it will save us from the sin-filth of the “untoward generation” in which we live, the “Saving” of a good conscience toward God.

**...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.** Baptism can't be a “Figure” without the reality to which it corresponds. What is the reality which saves us from the final and eternal condemnation of our sins? That reality is Jesus and His resurrection, heaven's proclamation of His victory over His enemies, including our sins. Apart from the real body, there would be no shadow, no “Figure.” Peter taught a powerful and needful truth related to “Now salvation,” but he urges our focus on the

reality which gives meaning to the shadow, the “Figure.”

There is indeed a true “Salvation” in baptism, but it is a “Now” salvation, not eternal salvation. Folks who object to the Biblical teaching on temporal or “Time” salvation, which relates to our present discipleship, occasionally protest that the term “Time salvation” doesn’t appear in Scripture. Well, “Now save” does appear in Scripture, in our study passage, and “Now” is an adverb of time, giving “Now save” the same meaning as “Time salvation.” Look back regularly to your personal baptism. Recall the zeal and joy you experienced in that moment. If that zeal and joy have dimmed, go back to Scripture and your simple faith at that special moment. Live to preserve that zeal and joy today. Whatever is going on in your life that dulls that moment, remove it and turn from it. Keep that moment fresh daily. That, my friends, is the true



“Now saving” which Peter taught in our study passage.

Elder Joe Holder